

METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR PROVISIONING A SET-TOP BOX

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application claims the benefit of U.S. provisional application Serial No. 60/559,554 filed April 5, 2004.

5 BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The invention relates to a method and system for provisioning a set-top box (STB). The invention further relates to content distribution networks for audio and video programming that involve conditional access systems and set-top
10 boxes.

2. Background Art

In a traditional STB provisioning system, the billing system provides all order functionality, and the conditional access controller provides all STB authorization and configuration management functionality. More specifically, any
15 STB configuration parameters must be supported by the conditional access controller software and signaling protocols. This arrangement, although suitable in many applications, limits flexibility in deploying new services that involve the STB.

There are also traditional high speed data provisioning systems. These high speed data provisioning systems tend to treat the devices being
20 provisioned as commodity devices (for example, DOCSIS cable modems). As such, these traditional high speed data provisioning systems do not differentiate among devices.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It is an object of the invention to provide an improved method and system for provisioning a set-top box (STB) that allows for greater flexibility in implementing STB features. The invention comprehends arrangements that enable
5 STB provisioning independently of the conditional access system. In this way, some STB configuration parameters may be configured without requiring support from the conditional access controller software and signaling protocols. This provides greater flexibility at the STB. This also allows the provisioning system to differentiate among STB devices.

10 In carrying out the invention, a method and system for provisioning an STB are provided. Comprehended features include enabling common provisioning of STBs independently of the conditional access system, incorporating hardware and software profile information (including, for example, product certification) for STBs manufactured by one or more vendors, and accepting
15 customer orders from retail affiliates and/or user activation websites.

At a more detailed level, the invention involves various different aspects. A method and system for provisioning an STB utilize a STB provisioning system. The system receives STB profile information, STB certification information and STB customer orders. It is appreciated that the information and orders received
20 by the system may be presented in any suitable way. The STB profile information and STB certification information are preferably instantiated as XML formatted documents. An STB profile import tool imports the STB profile information and STB certification information. The imported information is stored in a provisioning datastore.

25 The STB customer orders are preferably instantiated as XML formatted documents. A service provisioning system receives the STB customer orders.

A number of provisioning activities take place after an STB customer order is received. In more detail, the service provisioning system checks the customer order and notifies the billing system. The billing system notifies the conditional access controller. In an alternative, the service provisioning system
5 directly notifies the conditional access controller. Information relating to the STB device and customer order is stored in the provisioning datastore. The device manager and video device manager are notified about the STB device.

The video device manager delivers the cable operator information to the STB in the customer's home. Any suitable delivery mechanism may be used
10 to deliver the configuration to the STB from the video device manager. Further, a preferred format for the configuration data uses XML.

It is appreciated that the invention comprehends a collection of innovations that may be used together in various arrangements to achieve STB configuration/provisioning independently of the conditional access mechanism.
15 Many various implementations of the concepts of the invention are possible.

It is appreciated that the various components discussed herein including the STB profile import tool, provisioning datastore, service provisioning system, billing system, conditional access controller, video device manager and IP device manager may be implemented in any suitable way as appreciated by one of
20 ordinary skill in the relevant art. For example, various software and hardware devices may be utilized in the implementation of the components.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIGURE 1 illustrates a STB provisioning system according to the present invention with the service provisioning system interacting with the
25 conditional access controller via the billing system;

FIGURE 2 illustrates a method of the invention; and

FIGURE 3 illustrates a STB provisioning system according to the present invention with the service provisioning system interacting directly with the conditional access controller.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

5 Figures 1-3 illustrate the preferred embodiment of the invention. Accordingly, these detailed features are the preferred features, and other embodiments consistent with the concepts of the invention are possible.

 Figure 1 illustrates a STB provisioning system 10 that enables configuration of STBs 26 independently of the STB conditional access (CA) system
10 12. System 10 includes STB profile import tool 14, provisioning datastore 16, service provisioning system 18, device manager 20, and video device manager 22. Billing system 24 and STB 26 are also shown.

 There are at least three sources of input into the STB provisioning system 10, namely, STB profile information, STB certification information and
15 STB customer orders.

 Profile information may include generic make and model identification, hardware and software image identification, available STB interfaces (for example, network, video, audio), hardware capabilities (for example, hard drive characteristics), and software capabilities (for example, multi-lingual support). The
20 ultimate source of STB information is the manufacturer, although this information may be redistributed by others as appropriate.

 STB certifications by CABLELABS and/or the cable operator may be granted to a particular STB hardware make/model and software image version. Certification may also be granted for a particular subset of interfaces and
25 hardware/software capabilities that have been implemented in the STB 26. For the cable operator, certification may imply operator support for the generic and vendor-specific features in the STB profiles.

Customer orders may include customer address and contact information, device information (for example, make and model, serial number, MAC address, software image version), CABLECARD device information (if applicable), and a list of one or more cable operator services to enable for the STB
5 26 (for example, analog/digital tiers, premium channels, interactive services, Internet access). Customer orders may originate from retailer kiosks, affiliates, or a cable operator's own STB activation website for customer self-provisioning.

The STB profile information and STB certification information are instantiated as XML formatted documents (using a well-known XML schema
10 definition that permits vendor extensions). These XML documents are transmitted to the operator as email attachments, as documents that are uploaded to a cable operator web portal, or as data in a web services API invocation (or any alternative EDI transaction). The XML documents are ultimately submitted to the STB profile import tool 14, which imports the XML document information with knowledge of
15 the document source — for example, the import tool might ignore certification attributes in an STB profile XML document that was received from a previously unknown manufacturer. The STB profile information and STB certification information are stored in the provisioning datastore 16.

The STB customer orders are instantiated as XML over HTTPS
20 posts to a cable operator web portal (HTTPS provides TLS authentication and encryption of the HTTP transport protocol). Unlike the STB profile information and STB certification information, the STB customer orders are processed in real-time (or in near real-time). The cable operator web portal forwards each STB customer order to the service provisioning system 18.

25 Once the service provisioning system 18 has received the customer order, a number of provisioning activities occur. As best shown in Figure 2, at block 30, the service provisioning system 18 verifies that the customer order is syntactically correct. Further, the service provisioning system verifies the serviceability of the customer order, ensuring that the desired cable services are
30 available at the customer's home location. The service provisioning system 18 also

verifies that the STB device information (make, model, and software image version) corresponds to an approved, certified device, and verifies the CABLECARD device information (if applicable). With further reference to block 30, the service provisioning system 18 notifies the billing system 24 of the new customer order.

5 The customer's desired cable operator services are translated to billing system rate codes or service codes (depending on the billing vendor). At block 32, the billing system 24 notifies the conditional access controller 12 of the new customer order. The rate codes or service codes are translated to authorizations in the conditional access system. At block 34, the service provisioning system 18 stores the STB

10 device information (and CABLECARD device information, if applicable) and other customer order information in the provisioning datastore 16. At block 36, the service provisioning system 18 notifies the IP device manager 20 and video device manager 22 about the STB device 26 (and CABLECARD device, if applicable).

An alternative STB provisioning system is shown in Figure 3, in

15 which the service provisioning system 18 directly notifies (link 50) the conditional access controller 12 of the new customer order.

Referring again to Figure 2, a key component in the STB configuration of the present invention is the video device manager (VDM) 22. The video device manager 22 delivers cable operator configuration to the STB 26 in the

20 customer's home using XML over HTTP/HTTPS, as well as using XML over a UDP-based protocol (block 38).

The VDM messages use a well-known XML schema definition that permits vendor extensions, similar to the XML schema definition for STB profile information — this approach enables straightforward configuration of

25 vendor-specific features in the vendor-specific portions of the STB profile. Additional information items in the XML configuration messages include SCTE 18 Emergency Alert Signaling (EAS) configuration of the STB geographical location (state_code, county_code, and county_subdivision), and possibly SCTE 65 Service Information (SI) configuration of the appropriate Master Guide Table for the STB

30 (map_id) to enable multiple channel lineups. The authoritative source of the STB

configuration information for the VDM 22 is the provisioning datastore 16, which has been previously populated by the service provisioning system 18.

There are at least three delivery mechanisms from the VDM 22 to the STB 26.

5 In a first mechanism, the VDM 22 uses bi-directional IP unicast messaging (e.g. XML over HTTPS) to send the configuration to the STB 26. This mechanism relies on a functioning bi-directional network between the VDM 22 and the STB 26, but it enables STB acknowledgment of the new configuration. The VDM 22 discovers the IP address of the STB 26 via DNS lookups (using the device
10 serial number or MAC address as the DNS hostname), leveraging the DNS server within the IP Device Manager 20.

 In a second mechanism, the VDM 22 uses uni-directional IP multicast messaging (e.g. XML over a UDP-based protocol) to send the configuration to the STB via a DOCSIS Set-top Gateway (DSG) Broadcast Tunnel. Because
15 acknowledgments may be unreliable or non-existent, the VDM 22 sends such messages multiple times. All DSG-aware STBs receive such DSG Broadcast Tunnel messages, so each XML message encodes the unique device information (e.g. serial number or MAC address) corresponding to the intended message target.

 In a third mechanism, at boot-time, the STB 26 requests configuration
20 information from the VDM 22, assuming bi-directional IP unicast messaging (e.g. XML over HTTPS over TCP). The STB 26 discovers the DNS hostname (or IP address) of the VDM 22 from its DOCSIS initialization process (e.g. via a DHCP option or sub-option value). The VDM 22 determines the source STB 26 by reverse-resolving the source IP address into the DNS hostname (which refers to the
25 device serial number or MAC address) via DNS lookups. By leveraging this message exchange, the STB 26 does not have to store its configuration information in nonvolatile storage — although leveraging NVRAM might provide more reliable service to the customer.

The targeted STB devices at this time for embodiments of the invention are proprietary DOCSIS STBs and OPENCABLE Advanced Host devices. In the former case, it is assumed that the proprietary STB software image includes a (lab certified) application that manages the XML protocol exchanges with the VDM 22. In the latter case, it is assumed that the OCAP Monitor App manages the XML protocol exchanges with the VDM.

In another aspect of the illustrated implementation, the video device manager 22 may enable Internet access on the STB 26, if the customer order includes a request for Internet service, and if the STB hardware/software profile indicates that the STB 26 includes an Ethernet and/or USB data port that has been certified for Internet operation. The video device manager 22 would include configuration information (in its XML over HTTP(S) or in its XML over UDP message) that signals the STB 26 to enable its Ethernet or USB data port, which may be electrically shut off by default. With the Ethernet/USB data port enabled, and with the appropriate DOCSIS configuration in the STB 26 (handled separately by the IP Device Manager 20), the customer can plug in a computer or game station and obtain Internet access.

It is appreciated that embodiments of the invention enable the cable operator to accommodate many new STB manufacturers and platforms, and to selectively partner with manufacturers to enable innovative STB features in a timely fashion. Embodiments of the invention ease the deployment of DOCSIS STBs (proprietary STBs and advanced hosts), and ease the deployment of standardized EAS and SI.

Embodiments of the invention have numerous advantages over a traditional provisioning system. Embodiments of the invention greatly enhance the cable operator's ability to configure new features on new STB vendor platforms. The video device manager 22 can support vendor-specific configuration parameters through provisioning datastore data and through server configuration.

Embodiments of the invention enable the cable operator to accommodate many new STB manufacturers that are offering many new STB interfaces and capabilities, while assisting the operator to track which interfaces and capabilities can be enabled and managed by the operator. Embodiments of the invention enable the cable operator to accept customer orders from consumer electronic retailers, rather than forcing the customer to call the operator directly. Embodiments of the invention enable the cable operator to configure SCTE 18 CEAS and SCTE 65 (SI) parameters in a standard fashion, independent of the conditional access system in place. Embodiments of the invention ease the integration of STB and DOCSIS device provisioning systems into one holistic provisioning system.

It is appreciated that embodiments of the invention are suitable for provisioning a retail STB but are also suitable for provisioning a leased STB or any other STB. Further, XML is appropriate for presenting information in embodiments of the invention but other techniques and formats could be used. It is also to be appreciated that the drawings illustrate examples for the implementation of the illustrated functionality but this is done only to facilitate an understanding of the concepts involved and one skilled in the art may implement a system or method in a variety of ways.

While embodiments of the invention have been illustrated and described, it is not intended that these embodiments illustrate and describe all possible forms of the invention. Rather, the words used in the specification are words of description rather than limitation, and it is understood that various changes may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention.